

D&D for the Newbie

This randyman1967 “How-to” guide is more accurately a “How-to-get-started” guide for new players who have never actually played D&D before, but who are curious what all the hype is about. That said, even experienced players will find this guide useful, especially if they wish to introduce the D&D world to friends and family who are wondering what that “nerd” game is all about. Recent fans of “The Big Bang Theory”, “Rick & Morty” or “Stranger Things” may also be interested in this exciting “retro” game they’ve seen and heard about through these shows. After a short history of the D&D product line, I will include a list of previously released TSR, Inc. products that will ease the new player into the exciting world of D&D and role-playing in general.

While most of the products listed here have been long “out-of-print,” that is not to say they are unavailable. Most have been posted to the Internet Archive (www.archive.org) for historical preservation and while still copyrighted, the current owner of record (Wizards of the Coast?) seems to tolerate the sharing of these files (for purely entertainment purposes) since they are offered freely and in my opinion actually encourage interest in the newer products that are still available for sale both in stores and online. Links will be provided in this document to help you find them.

A Short History of D&D

The first version of D&D was released in 1974. Commonly known now as “Original D&D”, it was not so much a complete game in its own right, as it was an addition to a pre-existing game called “Chainmail.” It was a supplement to add “fantasy” elements to what was a strictly medieval miniature wargame. It is unique in that it used heavy references to J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Ring’s (extremely popular at the time, as it still is) including Hobbits (later changed to Halflings due to copyright issues.) This version is only recommended for true historical fans of the gaming genre.

By 1977 TSR was hard at work on what they intended to be their flagship product for the future, “Advanced Dungeons & Dragons” ([more on this in a moment.](#)) At the same time they were approached by an outside writer and fan, who offered to reedit the 1974 rule as a stand-alone introductory boxed set to the upcoming AD&D. After mastering this “Holmes-bluebook” Basic version, players were expected to move on to “AD&D,” and many did. But just as many enjoyed the simpler rule set of what had become the “Basic D&D” version, prompting multiple revisions to follow. In 1981, Tom Moldvay revised the “bluebook” into the “Basic Set” and David Cook immediately added the “Expert Set,” this became the “B/X” edition. Just two years later, Frank Mentzer revised the system again as a five boxed set edition containing “Basic, Expert, Companion, Master and Immortal Sets” known as the “BECMI edition.” Finally almost a decade later, in 1991, Aaron Allston consolidated the first four sets into the single hard-cover “Rules Cyclopedia” and introduced a new “Wraith of the Immortals” boxed set. 1991 also saw a new “Introductory” box set, “The New Easy-to-Master Dungeons & Dragons Game” which was repackaged in 1994 as “The Classic Dungeons & Dragons Game.” In 1995, TSR officially ended the “Basic Dungeons & Dragons” line in favor of the new Third Edition ([more on this in a moment.](#))

As mentioned above, in 1977 TSR was hard at work on “Advanced Dungeons & Dragons.” This version was to consist of three “core” rulebooks that would contain every rule needed to play the new “AD&D,” the Player’s Handbook, the Dungeon Master’s Guide, and the Monster Manual. This new “core system” would become the basis of all future editions of D&D. So as not to limit player options, many supplemental books were released to include: class specific books on druid and ranger, the Fiend Folio (a UK version of the Monster Manual), and over 80 adventure modules. In 1987, a small team of designer at TSR led by David “Zeb” Cook began work on the next edition and in 1989 “AD&D 2nd Edition” released with many rule and editorial changes. This era also saw an explosion in supplemental material produced to support the product line with literally hundreds of products produced to expand the line extensively. A final revision in 1995, called “AD&D 2nd Edition (revised)” and the inclusion of several “Player Option” books, as well as a “Premium” cloth bound reprint of the three “core” rulebooks preceded the end of “AD&D” as a unique product line and ushered in the next version.

The new millennium saw a major revision to the D&D line. A combination of new ownership by Wizards of the Coast and a desire to consolidate the two “competing” lines led to the creation of “Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition (or 3E)” also sometimes called the “d20 line” due to its heavier reliance on that particular die in the new rules. The dropping of “Advanced” from the name was an attempt to entice new player who were intimidated that the “Advanced” game was too complicated for new comers. And a simpler rule set would please both new and experienced players. This new system was also released under a new “Open Game License” that allowed for the creation of third-party supplements without direct approval of Wizards of the Coast. [This “OGL” also released WotC from having to release new product on their own to help feed the publics need for new material.](#)

In 2003, a revision to address player issues with certain rules and to better “balance” the game led to “D&D 3.5E”

2007 saw the release of “D&D 4E.” While not received well by many preexisting players, “4E” did introduce some small overall improvements to the system. In 2010, WotC released “D&D Essentials” a smaller ten product line to clean-up and ease entry into “4E,” including a “Rules Compendium” consolidating the multiple version of the “core” rulebooks. But within the decade declining sales and negative feedback led to...

“Dungeons & Dragons 5E” is the current edition of D&D. Announced in 2012 as “D&D Next,” “5E” was developed via a public open playtest. The “Basic Rules” were released as a FREE PDF in June 2014. The first “Starter Set” released later the same month and before the year ended the three “core” books were released. Also released free were the PDF “system reference document 5.0” and “system reference document 5.1” under an “OGL” and later under “Creative Commons license”. In 2021, a backward compatible “evolution” of “5E” (called “One D&D”) was announced for the 25th anniversary of the game, though after only a few releases on the website “D&D Beyond” WotC began to move away from the “One D&D” branding. A final revision of the “core” books in 2024, sometimes referred to as “5.5E” brings us up-to-date...

[but who knows what the future will hold for this now fifty-two year old product line.](#)

The preceding “Short History” section draws heavily from the Wikipedia article “Editions of Dungeons & Dragons” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Editions_of_Dungeons_&_Dragons)

All text in red are RandyMan1967 comments or opinions.

The Path to D&D Mastery

We will begin our path with two overly simplified board games.

1. Hero Quest (1989-90) from Games Workshop (UK) and Milton Bradley (US) – while not from TSR directly it play very like a D&D game, a team of a barbarian, a wizard, an elf, and a dwarf complete a series of 14 missions/quests on an ever changing “dungeon” board fighting monsters along the way. As I said, over simplified, but it does introduce concepts used in later games such as using dice to resolve combat, the use of spells in combat and for healing wounds, and the idea of the dungeon crawl, an extended mission underground to complete the assigned quest. The game also includes a reusable generic map that is easily customized using “dungeon tiles” so it can be used with any future games of your own design. The original boxed set also included many (35) plastic figures, 15 pieces of furniture, 21 doors, and 19 tiles to decorate your board. Trying to find an complete set of this almost 30 year-old game on e-bay or amazon for under \$200 is next to impossible (although I have found incomplete sets in thrift stores (goodwill, salvation army, etc.) for a little as \$10-\$20, it’s becoming more and more rare.) Luckily, I will provide my own print-and-play version on my Archive page the same day I post this file, look for the page titled “HeroQuest-pnp.”

A few years ago, Hero Quest (using a “crowd funding” website) was re-released in an anniversary edition.

While on the spendy side, it a very nice set and worth it if you are interested.

2. Dragon Quest (1992) from TSR (US) – this game was actually a direct attempt by TSR to steal a market share away from Hero Quest (listed above). It used a very similar poster map board but only included 6 plastic/metal figures for the heroes, the monster figures and doors were provided as card-stock fold-up (a method used for many later TSR products) and like HQ made extensive use of cards for most game elements from spells to treasure. It only included three quests but includes a blank map template and some very simple instruction to create additional quests yourself. Like Hero Quest, this game is long out-of-print and very hard to find, so I will be posting my partial remastered version within a few days. Keep an eye out for it.

Moving beyond the first two board games, Hero Quest actually released several add-on boxes both in North America and Great Britain, but they are even harder to find than the base boxed set. Dragon Quest recommends jumping into the actual D&D Basic game either through the next two entries on my list or going straight into the 1991 Rules Cyclopedia. All of the following were produced by TSR, Inc.:

3. The New Easy-to-Master Dungeons & Dragons Game (1991) – similar in layout to Dragon Quest it again uses a single poster map board (“Zanzer’s Dungeon.”) But it does use a slightly condensed version of the actual D&D Basic rules. What set’s this version apart is a set of 48 full-page cardstock “Dragon Cards.” Each of the double-sided “Dragon Cards” presented a “lesson” in how to play Dungeons & Dragons, playing the cards in order would teach the basics of D&D without the need to read the included “Rulebook” first. Also included were 4 double-sized “Dragon Cards” presenting your final “lesson,” a complete quest (in four parts) called “Escape from Zanzer’s Dungeon” to test your knowledge of what you learned in the previous 48 “lessons.” It also included almost the same 6 plastic heroes as Dragon Quest and monsters as card-stock fold-ups. I will be posting my cleaned up version of this game very soon, look for “Easy-to-Master_D&D.”
4. The Classic Dungeons & Dragons Game (1994) – this version of D&D is a repackaging of game 3. It is 99.99% identical to “Easy-to-Master” except for one thing, instead of a set of “Dragon Cards,” the same “lessons” are inserted throughout the much larger, main “Rulebook” making for a more “cluttered” product in my opinion. I highly recommend the 1991 version over this one.

All of the above games also included some form of DM screen, a heavy card-stock folding panel to hide crucial information from the players and a blank player record sheet (make as many copies as you need) to track player character stats as you play. All included a basic set of dungeon dice (these can be purchased in any Hobby/Game shop or online for very reasonable prices) or custom d6’s in the case of HQ.

The next three games were released as Adventure Pack add-ons to games 3 and 4 above:

5. The Dragon’s Den (1992)
6. The Goblin’s Lair (1992)
7. The Haunted Tower (1992)

All three of the above followed the same format as games 3 & 4 and each included three linked quests each with their own unique poster map boards, new card-stock fold-ups of additional monsters related to the new quests, and in lieu of a rulebook, each contained a few pages of set-up instruction and a single page “read first” introduction sheet to set the mood of the included quests. In total, another nine quests for your enjoyment. If your do need to consult the rules, simply use the rulebook from game 3 above. All of the above games are now or soon will be available on my own Archive page, look for Adventure_Packs.

This completes your Path to Dungeons & Dragons Mastery (see the next page for a section on Advanced Dungeons & Dragons and 5e).

So What’s Next

At this point you should have more than enough knowledge about the workings of D&D to move to the full version of the Basic D&D. Download a copy of the Rules Cyclopedia and several of the more than 100 adventure modules available on the archive (see my upcoming post “The Complete List of D&D Modules” for a complete list with download links.) As a suggested starting point look into the “Thunder Rift” entry level modules.

The Advanced D&D Path

Just like Basic D&D, AD&D also has its own Path to Mastery. Of course, mastery of AD&D assumes at least some prior knowledge of Basic D&D. As mentioned earlier, AD&D is basically a rules-heavy version of D&D.

1. First Quest (1994) – this game included a 16-page rulebook with cover, a 32-page monster & treasure book with cover, an 8-page wizard’s spellbook without cover, an 8-page clerics spellbook without cover, a 64-page adventure book (contains 4 adventures) with cover, and four poster maps (one for each adventure). A unique feature to this edition and the next was an Audio CD with multiple tracks to play during the first two adventures to enhance the playing experience.
2. Introduction to Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (1995) – this game is virtually the same as number 1 with the following changes: the rulebook is now called the Player’s manual and includes the spellbooks inside raising the page count to 32, the monster & treasure book is now called the Monster Manual (still 32 pages), and the adventure book is now called the Dungeon Master’s Guide, but it no longer includes the third adventure, “Across Wildspace!”. It does include the same Audio CD although with a new cover. But it only contains the first two maps in a slightly different presentation.
3. The Complete Starter’s Set AD&D (1995) – this final version is the same as number 2, with two additional changes: the Audio CD is no longer included, but all the books still mention it. (Although, I believe this may be an error on the part of the original poster of this pdf. It seems that all the books are from version 2 with only the blue (ver. 2) covers swapped for the black (ver. 3) ones. This particular edition does include “The Book of Lairs,” a Forgotten Realms accessory containing a ton of extra dungeons to use in extending the game beyond the three included adventures.

All three editions listed above also included 8 card-stock hand-outs: 6 pre-rolled character cards, 1 blank player record card (copy as needed), and 1 “town” card describing the local town (unnamed in First Quest but called “Freedale” afterward). All three editions also included a three-panel DM screen.

I have created a special version of my own that uses version 2’s Player’s Manual, Monster Manual, and Dungeon Master’s Guide (with all four Quests as separate books, as well as a separate “Town” book), along with the ver. 2 Handouts, and the ver. 3 DM’s Screen (it had a text free graphic outside cover.) I also used all four ver. 1 maps and included the two spellbooks from ver. 1.

Download [The AD&D Path.zip](#) from this very Archive page, it also contains the Audio CD as MP3 files (in the Audio folder of the ZIP file).

Here endeth [The Advanced D&D Path](#). To journey onward, download the AD&D 2nd Edition (revised) “core” books.
(I highly recommend the Premium Editions, they are very pretty books!)

The 5e Path

The current edition is 5e and as they are still actively being printed and sold I cannot provide links. But there are several “Starter Sets” available including a “Stranger Things” edition and a “Rick & Morty vs. D&D” set easily found both in stores and online to get you started on [The 5e Path](#).

3e and 4e also included several “Starter Sets,” but I recommend going straight to 5e as it is current
([please support the current copyright holder with a purchase](#)) and continually expanding.

I hope some of you have found this information useful. Comments and suggestions are always welcome, leave a review on the page where you found this article or email me:
therandyman1967@gmail.com